

Southern Appalachian Creature Feature Podcasts

Anniversary of the Dillsboro Dam removal

Greetings and welcome to the Southern Appalachian Creature Feature.

This tiny olive darter is a fish is rare enough to get the attention of state and federal wildlife biologists, so any help it gets is welcome. The fish had never been found upstream of Dillsboro Dam in North Carolina's Tuckasegee River. However, that dam was removed two years ago, and biologists have since discovered one of the darters upstream of the former dam site, hopefully expanding a range previously limited by a massive stone wall.

The discovery of the fish came during monitoring done to get an idea of the effect of the dam's removal on river life, and thus far, all signs point to positive impacts. A dam changes the area behind it from a free-flowing river to a reservoir, typically unsuitable habitat for most native species. Removing Dillsboro Dam returned nearly one mile of pooled water to free-flowing river. Thus far biologists have discovered at least 140 endangered Appalachian elktoe mussels colonizing the former reservoir area. Additionally, macroinvertebrates – the insects, crayfish, worms, and other animals without backbones that form much of the life in a stream ecosystem, have responded quickly. Among macroinvertebrates, biologists often pay special attention to mayflies, caddisflies, and stoneflies, whose intolerance to pollution makes them indicators of stream health. Following removal, the diversity of these three insect groups increased dramatically in the former reservoir area – from a monitoring low of two types found in October 2008 to a high of 40 in May, 2011.

For WNCW and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, this is Gary Peeples.